Lightning Cat

Jonathan Edelstein

Imfula was one year old, and she'd lived on the starfield at Chambishi Port for as much of that time as she could remember.

She may have been born there. She wasn't sure; she had only fragmentary memories of the time before her mother had chased her away. But she had still been very young when she took shelter in the breezeway of a port building on a rainy day and one of the portmaster's clerks noticed her.

She'd been a kitten still, light gray with darker gray tabby stripes and touches of white on the top of her head and left forepaw. He'd been a young man, himself not long out of his mother's nest, and he'd scratched her head and given her some of the fish he'd brought for lunch. "I think I'll call you Imfula, after the rain," he'd said, and he'd laid down another piece of fish on the walk. "This to stay."

She'd stayed, owned by no one but known to all. She saw the clerk seldom, but she became familiar with the tembantu – the port workers – and the people of the ship-clans. A few of them, in turn, became familiar with her, and they called her Imfula too.

She was happy enough in the port; although she didn't know it, she'd been made for such places. Thousands of years ago, in the days of the Union – or maybe even before that, in the days of the Commonwealth or the Association or the Accord – one of her ancestors had been changed, and as they'd been designed to do, the changes bred true. Imfula could see at night like all cats, but she could see colors as well as a human by day. She could count to ten, or on a good day twelve, and she could understand about a hundred of the noises the humans made. If no accident intervened, she would live fifty years. And she had what the long-ago designer, in a moment of whimsy, had called "augmented curiosity."

That could be a useful thing at ports and elsewhere. A curious cat would explore, would investigate every nook and cranny of a place, and would feel any difference or wrongness. And a cat who could understand a little of the humans' language could be – well, *commanded* wasn't the right term where cats were concerned, but told what places the portmaster had a particular interest in, and what they might be rewarded for reporting. Naturally, "reporting" was meant in the

broadest sense, but a meow was enough – if the cats could see problems and lead the people to them, the people could do the rest.

This was a job, if it could be called one, that Imfula was happy enough doing. She hunted through the ruins of outbuildings twenty-seven thousand years old and caught imbewa, field-rats, in passages that the humans had long since sealed and forgotten. She patrolled the living port offices and aprons and kept a weather eye on the seeing-machines at the customs station. And sometimes she went out to the landing field to greet the fikondo wa intanda, the starships.

There was something exciting about the ships – the lights and sounds of the vessels themselves, the bustle of the raffia-clad tembantu as they unloaded, the bakushita cha chende – the free traders of the ship-clans – lending a hand in their space-silks, and the cargoes. Oh, the cargoes. They were a riot of color, a riot of shape and texture – bolts of cloth, exotic furs, precious stones of a type that no one on Mutanda had ever mined, carven sculptures, machines made on a hundred alien worlds. And the smells, the smells: spices, scented woods, rare medicines, perfumes. The smells of the starfield had no parallel anywhere else in Chambishi Port or indeed all the world of Mutanda, and for a cat with augmented curiosity, they were a foretaste of paradise.

Imfula didn't understand it that way, of course; she had little concept of time beyond the present, and none at all of a life beyond this one. So she never knew how prescient such an understanding would have been.

One day early in her second year of life, the tembantu drove a cart of chifumi onto the starfield. Foods rarely traveled between the stars – they were bulky and perishable, and the worlds had sufficient of their own – but there were some that were prized throughout the realm of humanity, and chifumi, a creature of Mutanda's shallow seas that bore a passing resemblance to a trilobite, was one of them. A kilogram of it might sell, on a distant world, for a thousand indalama, enough to keep a cat in fish her whole life long.

Imfula knew none of that. She had never seen or smelled chifumi before – such foods were not for the likes of her, or even for portmasters. But she smelled it now, and it was the most delicious, tempting scent that had ever carried through the starfield air.

She had to follow it; her augmented curiosity would allow nothing else. She followed it all the way into the hold of the starship to which

it was consigned.

A couple of the tembantu noticed her; one of them reached down and gave her head a familiar scratch. They did nothing else. It wasn't their place to tell her where a cat could go, and anyway, the unwritten rule in Chambishi Port was that cats could go anywhere – the word for cat in the language of the old Union, kana nanda, derived from the word for small child. If any of the bakushita cha chende had noticed, they might have shooed her back out the loading gate, but none of them did. So she was still in the hold, savoring the way the smell of the chifumi mixed with the ship's other cargoes, when the gate slammed closed, the engines roared, and the ship lifted off.

She was, of course, terrified. She had seen many ships take off from the starfield, but the connection between that and what was happening now was beyond the limits of her understanding. The sense of motion and gathering speed, the noise, the way she seemed to weigh more as the ship gained distance from the world, the way the ship shook as if it were in the trembling hand of God – it was far beyond her to know the reason for these things. She looked for a hole to hide in, but there was none; she huddled against one of the pallets of cargo, mewed and whimpered, and wondered when it all would stop.

And then it did, because the ship entered the ichiyawafu, the space outside space, the highway between the worlds. And in the ichiyawafu, all went black.

The dreams of a cat are simple: play, the hunt, soft coziness barely remembered as a mother's embrace. But the ichiyawafu is named after the country of the dead; in the passage through it, people dream of their ancestors, and so do cats.

Imfula dreamed of grain fields and circular clay houses thatched with brush; the houses' hearth-fires glowed warm and inviting, there were mice to catch in the grain-stores, and she felt, with another cat's senses, *this is where I stay*. She dreamed of the sun's warmth on the banks of a slow, muddy river, and a boat that carried an idol bearing her face. She dreamed of other boats, of ships; she prowled the hold of an oaken caravel and let the waves rock her to sleep, she was in another hold that smelled of steel and oil and gunpowder, she was in a Commonwealth trader making passage between the stars.

That part of the dream was, at first, a comfort. Whatever cat ancestor had traveled in the Commonwealth ship had been through

the ichiyawafu many times, and he experienced it as a familiar sensation, something as natural as rain or thunder or the change of day to night. But then there was a sense of another place, a space beyond even the ichiyawafu; dark, foreboding and all-pervasive. In this place was a destruction beyond even death; somehow, Imfula knew that it obliterated even memory. It was a terror beyond terror, and she felt she was being drawn into it… and suddenly, she woke.

It took a long moment for the sights and smells of the hold to register, for her to realize that she was in a natural place again, and for that moment, she mewed again in primal fear. She made a sound in a place where there should be no sound, and the woman who'd come to check the hold at the far end of the passage heard her.

She was very tall for a woman, a meter eighty-five; she wore a free trader's silk jacket and trousers in shimmering black and green; her hair was shaved except for four close-cropped diamonds on top of her head; her dark brown cheeks were overlaid with the ashen lightning-shaped scars of her ship-clan. And she knelt, reached down, and caressed the space between Imfula's ears.

"I came to check the cargo, and here is a cat," she said. "How did you get here? No, no, it doesn't matter. You belong to the ship-clans now. A cat on a ship is good luck – even before the Migrations, they knew this. You can be our ubwanga, our good luck charm."

She reached down to scratch under Imfula's chin. "I'm Chikondi," she said. "Do you have a name? It's a shame you can't tell me. But if you're going to be part of the Lightning clan, I can call you Uluma, the sound of thunder." She laughed, and the laughter was an unaccountable comfort. "More a shumbwe's sound, a lion's, than yours, but something you can aspire to."

And so Imfula became Uluma. She knew nothing of the ship-clans' traditions, but even to her, it made sense that a new name was part of a new life.

"Wait here, Uluma," Chikondi said. "I'll bring you some food and water." But Uluma didn't wait. She didn't want to be in the hold anymore; she wanted familiarity, any familiarity, and the scent and voice of a human was more familiar than anything else about this place. When Chikondi keyed the door to the hold and walked out into the passage beyond, Uluma followed urgently.

"Coming for the tour, are you?" Chikondi asked and laughed again. And she *gave* the tour as if she were escorting a new port worker seeing

a ship for the first time; the holds, the sleeping cabins, the engines that powered the ship in natural space, the strange, eerie scattering of light in the witch-room and the machines that focused it to bring the ship in and out of the ichiyawafu. Uluma understood maybe one in twenty of the words Chikondi said, and together they made no sense to her, but the voice fell like rain, warm and comforting merely in its presence.

At last, they came to the bridge, where the six other members of the crew were gathered. Three were men, two were women, one was still a child; their silks were of many colors, and their facial scars marked them as being from three ship-clans. Beyond them, the viewports showed black space dotted with stars in strange patterns, a sun that was orange rather than the warm yellow-white sun of Chambishi Port, and in the near distance, a blue-green globe that shimmered in the darkness like a liquid jewel.

"That will be your first world, Uluma," Chikondi said, "or I should say your second. There are ten thousand worlds we know, and ten billion beyond them. Enough even for your curiosity, no? But it will be two days before we land, so until then, you'll have to explore the ship."

She did. There were bowls of food and water for her in the hold, but she inspected the cargo, roamed the passageways, made the acquaintance of the crew. She looked, as she'd learned to do, for things that felt wrong, but she didn't know the ship well enough; Chikondi had told her that some of the rooms were dangerous, a word she knew, but she couldn't sense whether the danger was greater than it was supposed to be. She would learn in time.

She slept the first night – there was a time when the ship's lights dimmed, which would do for night in the absence of anything better – in the hold, amid the intoxicating scents of the cargo. The second night, she found the chamber that Chikondi shared with Ndaniso, to whom she was ship-married, and nestled between them. They didn't send her away.

And when the lights brightened again, there was the chaos of landing – the red glow and trembling as the ship entered the atmosphere, the weight again seeming to pin her to the floor, the bump of the ship touching ground, the whoosh of the gate, the sudden breeze that crowded out the stale ship-air and brought in exotic smells. Then noise and voices as the port clerks came to check the manifest, the workers dragged in carts and lifts to unload, and the crew shouted

names of warehouses to match each consignment.

"This will take a while, Uluma kondelwe," Chikondi said, "and I see you're coming into season. Go explore, find a mate, bring children home to the ship-clans. But we will be here seven days. Remember, count seven, or the ship will leave without you." She reached down, gave Uluma another quick scratch, and motioned to the loading gate. There was a world beyond.

A world of wonder it was. The Union had fallen sixteen hundred years ago and the dark age that followed was finally lifting; the worlds' commerce bustled, there was new learning and discovery, there was a sense of renewal that even a cat could dimly feel. But more than that, once the port district was left behind, every sight, sound and scent was new.

In Chambishi Port, the breeze had carried the smell of the sea and the earthier perfumes of the city. Here, the air smelled of the great blue-green fan-like trees that towered over the lanes; the exotic fruits and grains sold in street-markets and cooked in cream-walled houses; the bird-dragons that pulled some of the carts and omnibuses; the pungent oil that powered the others. The men and women were caramel-brown and spoke a language Uluma had never heard; they prayed not to the orishas but to ancestors' images set in bright street-corner shrines; their clothing was fine linen in broad stripes rather than the geometric patterns that both the ship-clans and the people of Chambishi Port favored. Hard-shelled iridescent creatures, about the size of a field-rat and tasty when caught, were everywhere. And the commerce of the streets was not all human. Two races of awantu – people of a different creation – also lived on this world, one tall and broad with squat blue-gray heads and deep-set red eyes, the other resembling stick insects but with russet fur, a hint of cinnamon in their scent, and surprisingly expressive mandibles.

For a cat with little experience but augmented curiosity, it was an endless delight.

It was also a danger. Uluma sensed that in the bird-dragons' smaller cousins that flew low over the corbeled roofs; they were predators, and she made sure always to have shelter close at hand in case she needed to make a sudden sprint for safety. It came in unexpected places as well, as she learned when she explored a garden of wispy fronds and colorful vines with pine-cone-shaped fruits. A plate had been set out

on a garden path, fragrant with some exotic meat, and she was about to eat some when she heard a sharp warning. She looked up to see an awantu, one of the stick-insect race, holding out one of his grasping-arms in a stopping gesture and pointing the other at something nearby. Uluma's eyes followed and she saw one of the iridescent creatures on its back, obviously still in death.

Poison, she realized. At Chambishi Port, some of the clerks had put out poison for mice and rats. Evidently, the hard-shelled animals, tasty as they may be, were pests here, and the burghers of this city treated them the same way. Poison, as even cats knew, was something best avoided, and Uluma committed the smell to memory and looked for new lanes to explore.

She found a mate; humans had lived and traded on this world since the First Migration thirty thousand years before, and their animals had come with them. She found several mates during the five days she was in season. Monogamy is not a trait of cats. Each tomcat was of passing interest, an affair of an hour; the city was a fascination that was endless.

On the sixth day, she found Chikondi again.

She hadn't meant to; she was wandering through market stalls close to the port, hunting for imbewa or hard-shells and listening to the voices of three races bargain through incense-scented air, and Chikondi was there arguing over the price of a chronometer. Her silks today were yellow with triangles of white; she had a five-ndalama piece between her right thumb and forefinger; she was languid, someone who was in no hurry to finish her bargain, who had more than enough time to wait the merchant out.

That changed when Uluma, never one to wait for an invitation, jumped up on the stall and meowed a greeting.

Chikondi's haggling face turned into a broad smile. "It's you, is it? Finished with your business too? Let me pay for this" – she flipped the five indalama on the table, and got less back in change than the merchant might have had to give up with a longer bargain – "and we'll spend our last evening here together." She patted her shoulder; that was a place where Uluma wouldn't go unless invited, but now that the summons had been issued, she complied happily.

The port still held novelties; six days, or even six years, wasn't enough to exhaust them. Uluma surveyed the winding streets from a greater height than before; sometimes, when she saw or smelled something interesting, she jumped off Chikondi's shoulder and led her

to it. Not all the things that entice a cat are of interest to humans, but from Chikondi's laughter, one would never know. They shared a meal at a stall which sold grilled fish with a pungent green sauce; they looked together at the ancient public buildings just off the port; they followed scents that might be a perfumer's shop or a heap of garbage in an alley.

Then, from the entrance to that alley, a voice called to Chikondi in anger.

It belonged to a human, a man; he was small but of powerful build, with a set face that bore no clan-scars. He was dressed in the striped linens of this world, and Uluma could see that they were of fine quality. He stood in the only exit from the alleyway. And in his right hand was a long, wicked knife.

"I claim compensation!" he shouted.

"From me?" Chikondi answered. She surely hadn't expected this, as Uluma had not, but her voice was even, and her hands were open in a gesture of peace. "I don't know your name. I've never seen you, here or on any other world. What compensation do I owe you?"

"Your clan, inguluwe," the man said – he had called Chikondi a bush-pig, a deadly insult. "All the thieves in your ship-clan. You cheated me of two thousand indalama, and you need to pay me back!"

"There are courts, you know. You can bring your claim to the ship-clans' assembly–"

"I've done both of those! They're thieves like your clan is. And now…"

Uluma had understood little of the argument, but she knew it was an argument, and not one of the benign arguments that happened when merchants bargained or tembantu bantered. The man was building to a rage, and she knew, a second before it happened, that he would charge and that his knife would come up in a deadly slash.

Every one of Uluma's instincts told her to run. But another urge – an unaccountable one to defend Chikondi – pulled her even more strongly. She leaped from Chikondi's shoulder and met the man as he charged, claws tearing at his face. She missed his eyes but opened a gash above them, drowning his sight with blood; he thrust his knife at her, but she dodged, landing on her side in the alley.

He was temporarily checked, but he waved the knife again, calling more curses on Chikondi and preparing to advance. But now Chikondi had also drawn a weapon, this one not a knife, and she pointed its barrel at his chest. "Take your claim another place," she said.

His rage dissolved as quickly as it had come – staring at the business end of a Union pulse-pistol will often do that. But his anger remained. "You'll see," he said as he stalked away. "You just wait. You and all your thieves."

Chikondi watched him go, then knelt down and ran her hand quickly over Uluma's body. "You're all right, thank the Creator," she said, lifting the cat carefully back to shoulder-height. "You're my ubwanga in truth, it seems. We'll go back to the ship."

Her voice, once again, was a comfort. But it seemed somehow that the dark obliteration beyond the ichiyawafu was close at hand, and Uluma shivered.

There were new cargoes in the holds. From the animated way the traders talked about the goods they'd bought and the bargains they'd driven, it appeared that they'd done well. Uluma, for her part, was happy that the smells of this new world would be with her for a while longer.

Later, over an evening meal taken informally in the dayroom, the topic of conversation was the attack on Chikondi. Ndaniso, unsurprisingly, was incandescent with rage and wanted to hunt the attacker through the streets. Chikondi herself was the one who calmed him down, in a way she had obviously done before.

"And if you get arrested for breach of the peace?" she said. "You know how slow the courts are here. Our cargo will rot while we wait for your trial."

"He tried to kill you, kondelwe" – dear one, the same as Chikondi had called Uluma. "If he'd stabbed you with that knife–"

"He didn't."

"And there are the clans to consider. We can't have people thinking they can ambush us whenever they think they have a grievance."

"This wasn't 'people,' though." That was Twaambo, the oldest of the crew; he rarely spoke, but when he did, others fell silent. "This was one person. A lunatic, obviously – the courts and the assembly rejected his claim. There are always people who think they've been cheated. We can't stop our business every time that happens."

It took a few more rounds of calming, but Ndaniso was finally persuaded not to seek the knifeman out. They would file a complaint with the city police, nothing more.

In the morning, the complaint made, they departed.

The noise was the same. The acceleration was the same. The heaviness, the trembling, the laboring of the climate control systems – all those were the same. But Uluma didn't feel the same fear. This was the second time, and she knew what would happen. And this time Chikondi was there.

Chikondi's face was calm as Uluma looked up into it, and she took her eyes off the instrument displays for a moment to look back and smile. She patted her knee, an invitation Uluma happily accepted. "We'll be going into the ichiyawafu in a moment. Don't be afraid. And on the other side, there will be a new world." She caressed Uluma's back and sides with one hand while the other stayed on the controls, and this time when the blackness came, her touch eased the passage.

Uluma dreamed of humans – maybe now that she had joined the ship-clans, they were her ancestors too. She dreamed of ships, dynasties of ships; she dreamed of their crews exploring, settling, trading. She dreamed of the grand assemblies where the ship-clans gathered, of captains who conned their ships with a century of knowledge, of eager landsmen and women newly initiated to the clans and looking forward to their first landfall. She herself had been one of those, had she not?

Something about the dream seemed strange, and then Uluma realized – dimly, but she realized – what it was. She was seeing through human eyes, seeing with more than a cat's understanding. She knew how the ships functioned, how they were steered, how they were repaired. She felt that she would only have this understanding in the dream. But still, it helped her when the terror returned.

It was the place beyond the ichiyawafu again – the place of obliteration, where not even soul or memory remained. She was seeing through the eyes of a ship's engineer in the witch-room, feeling his despair as the mirrors misaligned and the light scattered to all the wrong places, feeling the ship, the cargo and all hands slip into oblivion. *If I could only have aligned that mirror*, he thought, *if only I could have reached the shutoff switch before the point of no return*. She saw the mirror and the switch, and then horror, dissolution, ending.

And she woke mewing, to the touch of Chikondi's calming hands and a new world in the viewports.

The ship visited three new worlds in the month that followed. There was the one which was a dazzling blue ocean with a chain of

lush green islands and fresh sea-scent everywhere. Uluma learned to swim in the calm, warm coastal waters, and when Chikondi mimed holding her breath, she learned to dive through sun-dappled seagrass and come up with fish. There was the world that was a moon, with one face eternally toward a deep green, ringed gas giant, with wise awantu that grew like trees and gave of their fruit to strangers. There was the world where the air was thin, and the starfield was in deep desert, and the night skies were black and starry as space.

Uluma learned these worlds, and she learned the ship. She learned how things should be, and she learned what she should look for to see when they were not. She began again to do what she had done at Chambishi Port when she was called Imfula – to lead the crew to problems that they may not yet have noticed and watch curiously while they fixed them.

She felt a presence inside her as well, warm, growing. She had never felt such a thing before, but by some cat instinct, she knew what it was – her dalliance in the city of the fan-trees had borne fruit, and she would bear a litter of kittens. She had brought children home to the ship-clans as Chikondi had said, and from her second ichiyawafu-dream, she knew that the clansmen saw that as something sacred.

She realized, without quite realizing, another thing as well – that tomorrow was different from today. The days on Mutanda had been the same, but now, they held new worlds and new sensations, and soon new life. Uluma began looking forward to these things. She had learned that there was not only a present but a future.

And on the fiftieth day since leaving Chambishi Port, she and the ship came to the world of Goma.

There was something new again at Goma – the ship would not land on the world at all. Instead, there was a station, ancient and cluttered, that orbited five hundred kilometers above that handled all the trading ships. It had an ancient, hulking core bristling with cranes and docking berths, and around it were the inkunka, the huts – modules, derelict ships and even containers that had been attached to the core by access tubes and converted into factories, shops and dwelling-places. They were as tangled as any ball of yarn that Uluma had ever chased.

The ship emerged from the ichiyawafu very close to the station, and it was only a moment before a crackling voice hailed them. "Unknown ship, identify yourself."

"Chelela," said Ndaniso, and Uluma's ears perked up; she had learned that Chelela – Morning Visitor – was the ship's name. "Mutanda registry 78-753. Last come from Zohali."

There was a moment's pause, no doubt while station control checked its register against the ship that had appeared on their instruments. "Your cargo, Chelela?"

"Sundries. We'll show our manifest at landing."

Another pause, and then, "Berth 42."

Uluma watched wide-eyed as Ndaniso guided the ship through the warren of the inkunka; it seemed impossible not to founder. But like the captain she'd dreamed of, Ndaniso was very good at his trade. He missed access tubes and modules by mere meters, but he missed them and came safely to rest.

And as the ship was moored, another delight awaited a cat with augmented curiosity: there was no gravity.

The old Union gravity generator in the station concourse still worked, but the one that covered the outer station had failed centuries ago, and nobody in sixteen hundred years had the knowledge or the tools to make a new one. The inkunka were in freefall, and so were docked ships. For Uluma, after a moment of vertigo, this meant a glory of movement in three dimensions – bouncing off walls, pirouetting in midair, launching herself after the ball that Chikondi playfully threw to her. She and Chikondi played for hours while they waited for the port inspectors to finish their work.

The unloading followed, and with it the familiar routine: the crew traded, and Uluma explored. There were many things to see in a station: the pulsing concourse with its market stalls and shebeens; the bubbling, many-scented vertical gardens and tank-farms; the freefall ateliers in the inkunka where glowing liquid glass was gathered from furnaces and worked into fabulous shapes. But at night, she returned to the ship. She hadn't done this on the other worlds she'd touched, and if anyone had asked her, she would never have been able to give a reason why. Maybe she wanted to stay close to home until her kittens were born, maybe her instincts were already seeking out a nest, maybe some entirely different foreboding; regardless, she sought Berth 42 and the Chelela when the station-lights dimmed, and neon took over the concourse.

And so she was in the dayroom two nights later when the conversation among the crew became solemn.

"There are rumors in the market," said Twaambo. "Someone in the portmaster's office is being paid to watch for us – to mark when we arrived, to give information on our ship and our movements."

"Your lunatic, Twaambo shikulu?" Ndaniso answered, the honorific heavy with irony. "One man who would do us no more harm?"

Twaambo held out open hands, the same gesture of peace that Chikondi had made to that very man. "We don't know it was him–"

"Our route is known, and we made three landfalls between there and here. There was plenty of time for a courier to get here ahead of us."

"I didn't say it couldn't be him. Maybe he's thirstier for revenge – for whatever he thinks we've done – than I'd thought. And he has money for such things, we know that. I know people at station control; I'll try to find out more."

"In the meantime," Chikondi said, "at least two of us everywhere. Armed. And everyone back to the ship at night."

The rule was passed by assent, and now Uluma's nest was shared. The following day, Twaambo reported that he'd arranged a meeting with a mupindushi, a customs judge attached to the portmaster's office. "He says he can tell us what we want to know. He wants money, of course, and information he can use in trade. Who will go?"

"I will," said Chikondi. "In a public place, with all of us somewhere close." She looked suddenly at Uluma. "All of us. You were my ubwanga on the world of the fan-trees; come with me tomorrow."

And so it was arranged – the midday after, they were at a concourse stall that sold imbote – honey-beer – and maize-and-okra stew. Chikondi's silks were black with a latticework of red; the middle-aged, soft-handed man across the table wore the carved hardwood mask of his office to conceal his face. The others of the crew were near but unseen.

It would be a while before the information was exchanged; there was a ritual to this trade as to any other, and there would be pleasantries, eating and drinking, and indignant denials of bribery before the serious business began. Uluma understood little of the talk, but she had seen enough bargains by now to know the pace and rhythm, and she found a comfortable place under the table to settle. Above, the mupindushi picked up the pitcher of imbote, and Uluma heard the sound of pouring…

And smelled poison.

She was sure of it. The smell was the same that she had committed to memory on the world of the fan-trees, the poison that the awantu had put out to kill pests. Every sense in her body was instantly alert, every instinct screamed danger, and before she'd finished the conscious thought, she'd leaped onto the table and upset Chikondi's cup.

"What have you done?" Chikondi said, but then she saw that Uluma was meowing and putting her nose to the spilled imbote again and again. She touched her own finger to the liquid, raised a drop to her nose, and she, too, knew.

She rose from the table, right hand already beginning to draw her pistol, but the customs-judge had seen the game was up and was already starting to flee. Chikondi chased after him shouting that he was a murderer and a thief and calling on the aid of the ship-clans. The others of the crew followed, and so did a few traders who had been enjoying a drink or a meal. Uluma sprinted ahead, racing to get in the fleeing judge's way.

The outcry was loud, especially when the mupindushi upset a stall in his flight and Ndaniso knocked over a table to get to him, but the chase was short. Three crewmen tackled the customs-judge, and a moment later, the bakulama – the station police – tackled them.

The police arrested everyone. Except Uluma, of course; no one would think to arrest a cat. Uluma was left to flee to the ship, where she waited alone for hours in the echoing hold, unsure if the others would return.

They did, early in the evening, after they'd paid the fine for breach of the peace and the bakulama had determined that they were otherwise the innocent parties. And in the meantime, they had learned.

"The customs-judge wasn't a judge," Twaambo said. "The police chief said he was hired to take the mupindushi's place and administer the poison, although he swears he didn't think it would kill. And… the fan-tree poison is strict contraband here. They say that only a mwata wa imbifi" – a king of rogues – "could have smuggled it in."

The sense of menace in the room became palpable. Every station, every city, had a crime boss, some more than one, but they were as unseen as the orishas and as feared. If the man who'd tried to kill Chikondi – twice now, apparently – was connected to one or worked for one, he was no mere lunatic.

"I've heard of this happening before," said Ndaniso. "When the ship-clans trade in something that a mwata wa imbifi thinks he controls, he might claim compensation for that. Maybe a Lightning did that on the fan-tree world – cost that man money or got him in trouble – and now he's at war with us."

"This is beyond us now," Twaambo answered. "We need to finish our trading and load up now. We'll go to Mutanda and put this before the assembly – they'll deal with that man, and they'll make sure the mwata on this station knows that a war with us will go badly for him."

The next hours were frantic: running to and from warehouses to call for cargoes, tembantu rushing goods to the holds and nearly coming to blows when they got in each other's way, a dizzying number of changes between the gravity of the station core and the freefall of the ship. But finally, it was done. The last two tembantu swam past Uluma through the main passage toward the loading gate, dragging their lift behind them…

And one of them had a tinge of witch-light.

Uluma saw it on him – no, she smelled it, as she'd never imagined she could do with light. And that was wrong! Loaders had no business in the witch-room, and none before now had ever carried its traces. She meowed and swam after him, looking for a member of the crew to warn, but he was gone, and then the gate slammed closed, and the ship cast off from the station.

It moved slowly at first as Ndaniso threaded through the inkunka, then with increasing speed. The extra weight was greater than previous takeoffs – soon, it was far greater. This soon after freefall, Uluma felt slow and awkward, weighing three times what she normally did, and the twenty or thirty meters to the bridge was a journey in itself.

"Faster, if we can," Chikondi said between clenched teeth. "We need to get into the ichiyawafu as soon as possible – we can't give them time to lay another trap for us."

"I'm trying," said Ndaniso. He worked at the controls; the engines labored, the weight became greater.

The trap is already laid, Uluma might have said, if she were human and if she'd known what a trap was. She meowed instead, trying to tell the crew – trying to tell Chikondi – that something was wrong. But her mind and theirs were on other things, and there was no breaking their concentration. Uluma would have to go to the witch-room alone.

She forced herself down the passage as fast as she could, struggling

against the weight. It seemed that she would never get there, but finally,she did. What she saw wasn't wrong. It was terrifying.

The witch-light had become lightning – violent, crackling bolts. And it wasn't focused on the receptor at the center of the room as it should have been. The witch-mirrors were askew and they were sending the bolts all around, including the base of the receptor and the machines that generated them. There were scars in the machines, and soon enough, they would be pounded apart. And Uluma suddenly remembered her second ichiyawafu-dream, and she knew what would happen if they failed. The blackness beyond the ichiyawafu, the destruction beyond memory.

She yowled as loudly as she could, part terror and part warning. She tried to yowl as loudly as the thunder for which Chikondi had named her. Maybe if the people on the bridge heard that cry coming from the witch-room, they would shut the drive down or come hurrying in witch-armor to make repairs. But maybe they wouldn't hear, or maybe they wouldn't be in time.

Uluma looked into the lightning again. Every one of her instincts – instincts that came from the part of her that knew only the present – told her to flee. But in the fifty days just past, she had learned that there was a future. She wanted her kittens to be. And… she felt a sudden devastation at the prospect of a universe without Chikondi.

Once, Chikondi had said that her name meant "love."

She looked into the lightning a third time. She remembered Chikondi telling her that she was part of the Lightning ship-clan now. She remembered that there had been lightning on that rainy day under the breezeway when the portmaster's clerk had given her first name.

She gathered herself and leaped into the witch-room.

She had not the slightest idea how the drive worked, but she remembered the dream: the mirror, the emergency switch. The jump was hard with the extra weight, but she saw where these things were, and she launched herself at them.

One bolt struck her, and another and another. The witch-light seared her fur, shocked her to the bone. But there was the mirror to knock aside, and there was the switch, and she retained enough presence of mind to push it closed.

She felt darkness. But it wasn't the darkness beyond the ichiyawafu, it wasn't the destruction of the soul, and that was a comfort as it claimed her.

When Uluma awoke, she was cradled in Chikondi's arms. She felt bandages, many of them. She felt a cool, soothing cream underneath. She felt pain, but the cream dulled it, and when Chikondi reached into an open medical kit and touched something to her skin, it dulled even further.

Chikondi caressed her head. "You are a Lightning, kana nanda. You belong to the ship-clans, now and forever."

Uluma stayed where she was, content for the moment to be there, content again for Chikondi's voice to fall like the rain.

"You'll be a while healing. But all the damage is on the outside, so you *will* heal. And your kittens will be born."

After a while – though not so long a while as it would take to heal – Ndaniso and Twaambo came in, the other crew behind them. They had finished repairing the drive after taking images of it to present as evidence to the assembly. "We go to Mutanda now," Twaambo said, "and we stop a war." A moment later, the ship slid into the ichiyawafu.

Uluma dreamed of Mutanda, of Chambishi Port. She dreamed of the starfield, of the port buildings and passageways, of the people who had known her as Imfula. She could stay if she wanted, and be Imfula again. Maybe she would, if only for a day; maybe she would visit old haunts and renew old acquaintances. But for a cat with augmented curiosity, there was no place but the stars, and only a place that had Chikondi in it could be home.

She woke, Mutanda's yellow-white sun in the viewport, Chikondi's arms still cradling her.

"There are ten thousand worlds we know and ten billion beyond," Chikondi said again. "Stay with me, and we will see them all."